

Nature's Influence on Narrative in Chekhov's Fiction

by

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Nature's Influence on Narrative in Chekhov's Fiction

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Jillian Porter

Abstract: The recent boom in ecological criticism invites reconsideration of the role nature plays in the works of Anton Chekhov. Drawing on existing accounts of nature in Chekhov's fiction as well as in Russian literature and culture more broadly, this thesis reveals a crucial and previously unrecognized affinity between five of Chekhov's most celebrated stories: "The Kiss"

(«Поцелуй», 1887), "Fortune" («Счастье», 1887), "Gusev" («Гусев», 1890), "The Man in the Case" («Человек в футляре», 1898), and "The Lady with the Little Dog" («Дама с собачкой», 1898). In each of these otherwise unrelated stories, nature complicates the characters and the stories they tell themselves and one another. In some cases, nature gives the characters new insights and helps them to evolve. In others it gives readers a new understanding that the characters themselves do not share. In all cases nature in Chekhov's works opens a broader perspective, dwarfing the characters and their existential anxieties by the immensity of land, water, or cosmos. Ultimately, Chekhov presents myriad ways in which nature frames and exceeds human experience, incites and resists narrativization.

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## I: Introduction

The recent boom in ecological criticism invites reconsideration of the role nature plays in the works of Anton Chekhov. Exploring five exemplary works of Chekhov's short fiction, "The Kiss" («Поцелуй», 1887), "Fortune" («Счастье», 1887), "Gusev" («Гусев», 1890), "The Man in the Case" («Человек в футляре», 1898), and "The Lady with the Little Dog" («Дама с собачкой», 1898), we find that in Chekhov, nature is not mere description or adornment. Instead nature reveals what is repressed or otherwise left unsaid. As this thesis shall argue, Chekhov presents myriad ways in which nature frames and exceeds human experience, incites and resists narrativization.

Several critics have addressed the representation of nature in Chekhov's fiction, and several others have explored this theme in Russian literature and visual art. In *Nature and the Quest for Meaning in Chekhov's Stories* (1965), Peter Rossbacher identifies three recurring qualities of nature in Chekhov's fiction: mystery, silence, and the uncanny (390-391). In *Nature in Chekhov's Fiction* (1974), Bill Valentine stresses the non-linguistic rapport between Chekhov's characters and nature. As useful as they are for the present study, Rossbacher's and Valentine's insights leave room for further analysis. In particular, they do not account fully for the relationship between nature and the narratives the characters create to understand themselves and their place in the world.

Prominent studies of land- and waterscapes in Russian cultural imagination are similarly helpful but inadequate for understanding fully Chekhov's handling of nature. In *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, Christopher Ely stresses the role landscape painting plays in the cultural construction of Russianness, and Chekhov's works frequently frame views of nature much like inserted landscape paintings. However, Chekhov's

views of nature tend to be both personal and broadly human instead of or in addition to being explicitly national. In *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (2013), Jane Costlow opens a fruitful line of inquiry with her discussion of the painter Oleg Vasil'ev's portrayal of subjects that disintegrate and reintegrate into the natural landscape. Equally valuable is Costlow and Arja Rosenholm's assertion in *Meanings and Values of Water in Russian Culture* (2017) that rivers are highly symbolic liminal spaces that offer characters the potential for transformation. Costlow and Rosenholm's insights may be productively applied to Chekhov's fiction, which engages a wider range of natural phenomena than just forests or water. As we shall see in the pages below, in Chekhov's fiction characters and the stories they tell disintegrate and reintegrate into land- as well as water- and skylscapes, all of which have transformative capacities.

## **II: "The Kiss"**

In "The Kiss," nature encourages and then shatters the protagonist's imaginary transformation of self. "The Kiss" tells of a staff captain named Ryabovich, whose battery accepts an invitation to a local landowner's party near a village through which they are passing. During the party, Ryabovich wanders into a dark room and accidentally receives a kiss intended for someone else. Without learning who the woman was who kissed him, the unattractive, awkward Ryabovich subsequently reimagines himself as the hero of a romance. One instance showing that Ryabovich creates a story about himself occurs after he participates in sexual exploits with the other officers. After returning from these activities Ryabovich imagines himself as a character who committed an act of infidelity against his beloved: "He was always sorry afterwards, felt deeply guilty, and mentally begged *her* forgiveness" («[Он] всякий раз бывал грустен, чувствовал

себя глубоко виноватым и мысленно просил у *нее* прощения»; “The Kiss,” 128; «Поцелуй», 421).<sup>1</sup> Many critics have explored Ryabovich’s delusional reimagining of self in this, one of Chekhov’s most celebrated stories, but the role of nature in the hero’s delusion has yet to be fully explored.

Nathan Rosen does discuss nature in his essay “The Life Force in Chekhov’s ‘The Kiss,’” arguing that Ryabovich’s “adventure has awakened his dormant force of life” (177). Rosen explains near the essay’s end that Ryabovich’s “enlargement of his despair to include the cycle of nature and then the whole world” (182) gives him a sense that he has gone through his own cycle of experiences (182). Rosen attributes Ryabovich’s bitterness at the end of the story to the fact that Ryabovich’s “despair is so enormous that he will no longer let himself be tempted by fate into starting another illusory cycle” (183). While Rosen makes a clear and solid point, Ryabovich’s despair could also come from an existential realization that he is alone in his immediate surroundings and in the world at large. The “cycle” that Rosen refers to is not only necessary for Ryabovich’s growth, but also describes a perpetuating force behind the process of man inventing narratives in a world which often lacks sense or comfort.

During the party, the cultivated nature of the host’s garden deceives Ryabovich. According to the narrator, everyone at the party notices the scent of flowers in the air, but to Ryabovich alone “it seemed [...] that the scent of roses, poplars and lilacs, came not from the garden, but from the faces and the dresses of these women” («и ему уже казалось, что запах

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, citations from English translations of Chekhov’s stories refer to *Anton Chekhov’s Selected Stories*, edited by Cathy Popkin. Citations from the original Russian texts refer to *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii i Pisem*. The translations of “The Kiss,” “Fortune,” “Gusev,” “The Man in a Case,” and “The Lady with a Little Dog” are by Ann Dunnigun, Rosamund Bartlett, Ronald Hingley, Constance Garnett, and Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, respectively.

роз, тополя и сирени идет не из сада, а от женских лиц и платьев»; “The Kiss,” 119; «Поцелуй», 410). Here, nature acts as a trickster, manipulating Ryabovich’s sensory perception and giving him a skewed sense of what is real. Later, when kissed by the unknown woman in the dark room, Ryabovich again perceives the aroma of the flowers in bloom (120; 411). For Ryabovich, the women he encounters take on the characteristics of the natural world. His mistaken identification of women with garden flowers—themselves an artfully arranged distortion of nature—points forward to his creative reimagining of himself as the hero of a love story after the kiss.

The river, too, is implicated in Ryabovich’s self-delusion. Much like the rivers Costlow and Rosenholm analyze in *Meanings and Values of Water in Russian Culture*, the river in “The Kiss” is an image of “possibility, of boundary crossing and shape shifting” (7). Chekhov’s first mention of the river points to the “possibility” of a “shifting” reality: “Here and there the stars were reflected in the dark water; they quivered and broke—and from this alone one could surmise that the river was flowing rapidly” («Кое-где на темной воде отражались звезды; они дрожали и расплывались — и только по этому можно было догадаться, что река текла быстро»; “The Kiss,” 122; «Поцелуй», 414). Seemingly relocating the cosmos from high to low and also concealing the current below, the mirage on the surface of the water echoes Ryabovich’s delusional creation of meaning, confirming Costlow and Rosenholm’s assertion that in Russian literature and culture, rivers “offer maps to ‘real-and-imagined’ spaces [that are] intertwined” (7).

By contrast, when the river reappears near the story’s conclusion, it signals Ryabovich’s coming disillusionment. As Ryabovich beholds the same river in August that he had seen just



after the kiss in May, the river now delineates a boundary that opens onto a new perspective on the other side:

On the other side of the river, in a sky washed with crimson, the moon was rising, and in a kitchen garden two peasant women were talking in loud voices as they pulled cabbage leaves; beyond the garden several huts loomed dark against the sky. But the river bank was the same as it had been in May: the path, the bushes, the willows overhanging the water; only the song of the stout-hearted nightingale was missing, and the scent of poplars and young grass.

На том берегу всё небо было залито багровой краской: восходила луна; какие-то две бабы, громко разговаривая, ходили по огороду и рвали капустные листья; за огородами темнело несколько изб... А на этом берегу было всё то же, что и в мае: тропинка, кусты, вербы, нависшие над водой... только не слышно было храброго соловья да не пахло топодем и молодой травой. ("The Kiss," 129; «Поцелуй», 422)

This marks the first point in the narrative where the moon is seen without distortion. Moreover, the deromanticizing image of the women chatting in "loud voices" while rough-handling the cabbage and the absence of the nightingale's song and the scents Ryabovich had perceived here in May now stabilize his imaginings.

This scene signals Ryabovich's final awareness that the story he had constructed for himself was an invention of his imagination, and that the world is as it has always been. Likewise, Ryabovich's romantic situation remains unchanged. Ryabovich becomes grounded by

this realization and gains awareness that he is alone in the world. The peasant women's harvesting represents timeless patterns of human existence; thus nature alludes to the fact that Ryabovich's plight is not a singular one. Ryabovich has passed through an experience that has helped him mature. After this grounding experience, near the end of the story, Chekhov writes: "Now that he expected nothing, the incident of the kiss, his impatience, his vague hopes and disappointment, presented themselves to him in a clear light" («Теперь, когда он ничего не ждал, история с поцелуем, его нетерпение, неясные надежды и разочарование представлялись ему в ясном свете»; "The Kiss," 130; «Поцелуй», 423). His new insights about not only his, but man's, insignificance in relation to the cosmos create a chance for growth, leaving it for the reader to imagine what Ryabovich's fate may be.

Similarly, the final appearance of the river in the story suggests that Ryabovich's experience of self-delusion and disillusionment are part of a natural process that endlessly repeats. As Ryabovich beholds the river in August, Chekhov writes: "The river ran on, no one knew where or why, just as it had in May; from a small stream it flowed into a large river, from the river to the sea, then rose in vapor and returned to rain; and perhaps the very same water he had seen in May was again flowing before his eyes..." («Вода бежала неизвестно куда и зачем. Бежала она таким же образом и в мае; из речки в мае месяце она влилась в большую реку, из реки в море, потом испарилась, обратилась в дождь, и, быть может, она, та же самая вода, опять бежит теперь перед глазами Рябовича...»; "The Kiss," 130; «Поцелуй», 423). Much like the ceaselessly moving current of the river, Ryabovich's experience appears both dynamic and fixed. By this point in the story, Ryabovich has undergone an evolution in terms of the way he understands his relationship to others and the world around

him. However, both the landscape itself and the fact that Ryabovich observes it while unnoticed and alone remain unchanged.

Thus nature frames “The Kiss” in two ways. One is through its immediacy, lending nature a presence which not only reflects but influences the main character’s experience. The other documents patterns that are at the same time fixed, cyclic and perpetual, existing beyond the sphere of human experience and understanding. Ryabovich interacts with nature in its present impermanent manifestations, while at the same time both he and they are placed within a cosmic framework that reveals his struggles as relatively insignificant. Nevertheless, Ryabovich’s experience does hold significance in that it points to a more general, recurring aspect of human psychology—namely, the tendency to understand experience through the invention of narratives, such as the one Ryabovich constructs in his mind about the meaning of the kiss.<sup>2</sup>

The foregoing analysis complements existing accounts of nature in Chekhov’s works. According to Rossbacher, Chekhov’s representation of nature is marked by mystery, silence, and the uncanny, and these qualities help the characters to recognize their own loneliness and alienation against nature’s backdrop (390-1). Ultimately, Rossbacher argues, “The idea of life as an aimless joke points to the idea of some curse on man's life due to which man's attempt at understanding himself is nullified” (390). In “The Kiss,” Chekhov does emphasize Ryabovich’s insignificance by dissolving his illusions against a backdrop of expansive nature, but in fact, Ryabovich’s life is imbued with a new meaning precisely when it is dwarfed by nature. Ryabovich’s recognition of his own unimportance seems to be a necessary step in his personal

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Pragmatics of Insignificance*, Cathy Popkin describes two tendencies in Chekhov’s fiction that are pertinent to Ryabovich’s narrative in “The Kiss.” The first is that an insignificant event is distorted by a character to represent something of inflated importance, and the second is that the expectation of a “significant event” is thwarted and fails to manifest itself in the character’s story (26).

growth and a productive new way of relating with his environment. At the end of the story Ryabovich clearly perceives that he has deceived himself. After this realization Ryabovich is informed that his battalion has gone to the General's. Disappointed and bitter, Ryabovich makes a conscious decision to remain at the camp alone (130; 423). While Ryabovich comes into contact with the harsh reality of his alienation, this experience also grants Ryabovich a newfound ability to distinguish between delusion and his reality. Ryabovich's newfound knowledge makes him uncomfortable, but it also suggests a potential for engaging with the world in new ways. Thus the story ends with the potential for Ryabovich to replace his imagined experiences with experiences that are tangible.

### **III: "Fortune"**

As in "The Kiss," in "Fortune" nature both inspires and resists the stories men tell. "Fortune" is a story that takes place on the steppe, where two shepherds encounter a ranger just before dawn. The older of the shepherds engages in a compulsive narrative about treasure that is said to lie buried underground in nearby places, while the ranger's view concerning treasure to be found on the steppe is calm and barely stated. The story is marked by the tension between these two understandings of treasure. While the older shepherd claims to know the location of treasure, he is incapable of extracting it because his narrative claims that the treasure has "spells" cast upon it (110-11; 214-15). As for the ranger, the expanse of the steppe and the cosmic realm beyond the horizon overwhelm his capacity to verbalize what he witnesses. It is suggested that the richness of the natural scenery that the ranger gazes on is what he considers to be a kind of treasure. However, the immensity fills him with so much wonder that it exceeds his ability to convey the wonder to the other characters in the story. The ranger is unable to reveal the wonder of the

landscape that the old shepherd inhabits, because it is so vast, and also because the shepherd is more concerned with telling stories about treasure and thus is not able to behold what the ranger sees.

“Fortune” portrays human beings and other time-bound manifestations of earthly nature as unified in their alienation from the infinity of the cosmos. For instance, Chekhov draws a parallel between the ranger and the flowers by highlighting the ephemeral qualities of each. Chekhov subverts the obvious difference between the ranger and the flowers by alluding to the ways in which both man and flowers have a similar molecular quality when placed in the landscape against the horizon. What lies beyond the horizon is a mystery, but also a source of sustenance on earth. The sun, the source of life, is indifferent to the flowers. This is not unlike ways that, as Valentine points out, Chekhov shows that nature is indifferent to man:

The crimson sun appeared, enveloped in a light haze. As if pretending that they were not yet bored, broad bands of still, cold light started descending merrily to the earth and stretching out, basking in the dewy grass, Silvery Artemisia, the blue flowers of wild allium, yellow rape, and cornflowers all burst into radiant colour, taking the sunlight as their own smile.

Окруженное легкою мутью, показалось громадное багровое солнце. Широкие полосы света, еще холодные, купаясь в росистой траве, потягиваясь и с веселым видом, как будто стараясь показать, что это не надоело им, стали ложиться по земле. Серебристая полынь, голубые цветы свинячей цибульки, желтая сурепка,

васильки — всё это радостно запестрело, принимая свет солнца за свою собственную улыбку. (“Fortune,” 114; «Счастье», 218)

Both the ranger and the flowers create narratives for themselves against the backdrop of the rising sun. Chekhov deconstructs the obvious difference between man and flowers by highlighting their similar temporal qualities against eternal cosmic elements. Likewise, there is a divide between what is perceived and what is expressed similar to the divide that exists between the sun and the flowers. The sun feels indifferent to the flowers, but they invent their own narrative about the sun, and in so doing express themselves in vivid and varied colors. The flowers also see their own joy and happiness as the sun’s, thus shifting the tone in the previous passage from cool to warm.

Chekhov deepens the relationship between the ranger and the flowers by mirroring imagery between the two. Before the ranger gets on his horse, he is described as “stroking his long whiskers, which were covered with dew” («поглаживая свои длинные, покрытые росой усы»; “Fortune,” 112; «Счастье», 216), while later when the sun rises, the grass is also depicted as being covered with dew (114; 218). These two images placed side by side work like an octave in a musical scale, the same note in different registers. At one end of the scale is man, and at the other end are the flowers, but both share a similar resonance. The dewiness of the ranger’s beard and the grass share similar tactile qualities. Here, Chekhov aligns and emphasizes the unity between two dissimilar things, the beard and the grass, that both become similarly overwhelmed in fully understanding their interaction with the cosmic elements in the story.

In order to reveal nature’s mystery and create a sense of wonder, Chekhov utilizes ambiguity as a device. Ambiguity augments the range of possible interpretations concerning

nature. This suggestive atmosphere allows for a multitude of meanings by leaving certain qualities of nature undefined:

It was already becoming light. The Milky Way had grown pale and was slowly melting like snow, losing its outline. The sky was becoming overcast and dull, so that it was difficult to tell whether it was clear or completely covered clouds, and only the bright, glossy strip in the east and the few remaining stars here and there indicated what was happening.

Уже светало. Млечный путь бледнея и мало-помалу таял, как снег, теряя свои очертания. Небо становилось хмурым и мутным, когда не разберешь, чисто оно или покрыто сплошь облаками, и только по ясной, глянцевиной полосе на востоке и по кое-где уцелевшим звездам поймешь, в чем дело. ("Fortune," 112; «Счастье», 215)

This undefined cosmic space swamps the ranger's ability to fully comprehend what he sees. The night and the day mix. Snow is invoked and contrasts with the anticipated heat of the sun.

Chekhov describes a place where objects beyond the horizon are embryonic and lack clear description. These artfully applied uses of ambiguity suggest that there are limits to what man can know in regard to nature, and in turn, this mystery creates an array of possibilities.

Ambiguity also plays a role in the ranger's discourse which is punctuated by silences and things left unsaid: "He climbed heavily onto his horse and narrowed his eyes as he gazed into the distance, looking as if he had forgotten to say something or had somehow not finished what he had to say" («Он грузно уселся на лошади и с таким видом, как будто забыл что-то или

недосказал»; “Fortune,” 112; «Счастье», 216). In intentionally leaving the ranger’s point of view undefined and unspoken, Chekhov points to the mystery of nature that supersedes human experience and intellect.

In “Fortune” the steppe itself is presented as a kind of treasure, just as traditionally the steppe is portrayed as landscape that is important to Russian identity. Indeed, Chekhov captures a Russian spirit in his depiction of nature in “Fortune” in harmony with traditional ways long held by Russian artists. In *This Meager Nature*, Christopher Ely discusses the artist Mikhail Nesterov and his depiction of nature that includes “humble simplicity, vast open fields and slender, delicate birches” (220). On the surface, Chekhov’s nature description in “Fortune” shares a commonality with the features of Nesterov’s work in depicting a landscape that Russian readers may perceive as part of their own cultural identity. Ely points out: “In Nesterov’s paintings the realist depiction of rural Russia had come to cradle a forceful idealization of Russian nationality” (220). However, Chekhov’s depiction of Russian landscapes cannot be wholly defined in such uniform terms.

In Chekhov’s works nature goes beyond the cultural and historical context of both his characters and his readers. One way that Chekhov overwhelms the characters’ narratives with landscape is by diminishing their scale by invoking cosmic space and time. One such example occurs in “Fortune”: “If you climbed to the top of Saur’s Grave, you could look out and see a plain that was as flat and boundless as the sky... Only from up here was it possible to see that there was another life in the world beyond the silent steppe and ancient kurgans” («Если взобраться на эту Могилу, то с нее видна равнина, такая же ровная и безграничная, как небо... Только отсюда и видно, что на этом свете, кроме молчаливой степи и вековых курганов»; “Fortune,” 113; «Счастье», 217). The allusion to the kurgans depicts the steppe as



transnational and something that transcends the ranger's specific position in time and space. In this way, Chekhov uses the perspective from Saur's Grave to indicate the complex relationship between nature and the cosmos. The author also implies that both time and space lie immeasurably far outside of its characters, and in a complexity that is impossible to describe. This adds another layer to the way that Chekhov invokes nature and even subverts preconceived notions that the reader may have regarding it.

In summary, it is not only human beings and flowers who are inspired and dwarfed by nature. Both the living and the dead are witness to the landscape, and both are likewise limited to it. Thus man's ephemeral qualities are also aligned with such ephemeral qualities as are found in the flowers. The rise and fall of civilizations can be compared to the perennial death and blooming of flowers as the seasons cycle year after year. Thus the flowers contribute to the narrative by expressing the similarities between man and other forms of nature and by emphasizing the limitations of man's intellect and ability to understand life's mystery.

#### **IV: "Gusev"**

The treatment of nature in "Gusev" stands apart from the other stories in this paper in that the story depicts man and nature as coming into a sense of wholeness, unity and harmony. The title character, Gusev, whose point of view receives the main focus in the story, is a consumptive discharged soldier who dies on a ship at sea. In the story Gusev relates a story he has heard about a large fish that caused a boat to sink in the ocean (202; 327). This story is relevant to "Gusev" because it symbolizes the fates of Gusev and other men that die at sea. This story also represents the tension between alien environments confronting each other, which is a central theme throughout the story. Paul Ivanovich, his neighbor in the sick-bay with the same illness, "acts as

if he has not heard and says nothing” («Павлом Ивановичем, молчит, как будто не слышит»; “Gusev,” 203; «Гусев», 327). After this, Chekhov writes (in one stand-alone sentence) for emphasis: “Once more quietness descends...” («И опять наступает тишина...»; “Gusev,” 203; «Гусев», 327).<sup>3</sup> Unlike the other stories analyzed in this paper, Gusev’s story nearly comes true, albeit in an unexpected way: at the end of the story, it is not the boat that Gusev mentions that sinks, but Gusev himself. As Gusev descends to the ocean’s floor, a similar “quietness” also descends upon the reader. It could be surmised that the ocean, the shark and the pilot fish also act as a type of narrator which allows the reader to witness an alien environment that reveals the intricacies of man’s relationship with nature in a way that is suggestive rather than explicit.

Gusev’s retelling of this story irritates the more sophisticated Paul Ivanovich, who finds it foolish (203; 327-28). However, it is suggested that what Gusev narrates to Paul Ivanovich in the story signifies a close relationship between the characters and the calamity of death that ultimately occurs to them both while at sea. Indeed, both characters are in the process of crossing over from life to death. Moreover, to punctuate the discourse between the Paul Ivanovich and Gusev, Chekhov not only shows that situation that repeats, but suggests that Paul Ivanovich does in fact understand Gusev, and is thus affected by both his words and the moving sea. Paul Ivanovich’s sea-sickness begins after Gusev announces the arrival of strong winds (203; 327), showing us that both Gusev’s narrative and nature influence Paul Ivanovich’s psychological and physical wellbeing. While at sea, the wind picks up and Gusev relates a folk saying that he’s

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<sup>3</sup> Chekhov’s use of ellipses in the Russian telling of “Gusev” is a feature that Hingley’s translation leaves out. This device is used throughout the story, and in each instance signals both a gap between opposing elements, as well as a situation that repeats. The use of ellipses ties up Chekhov’s depiction of nature with a purely textual narrative device, and in so doing also alludes to the divide between language and natural phenomena. Thus I have retained this device in the original Russian in each instance quoted in my analysis. In other respects I have left Hingley’s translation unaltered.

heard: “The wind’s broken loose from its chain” («Ветер с цепи сорвался...»; “Gusev,” 203; «Гусев», 327). Thus there is a narrative thread that is transferred from peasants through Gusev, and finally to Paul Ivanovich. The colorful expression repeats what Paul Ivanovich doesn’t want to hear, namely that conditions at sea are about to become more difficult and cause him physical and psychological discomfort.

Indeed, Gusev is described in the story as located in a liminal space, where he has begun to cross over from one form of existence to another. Applying the ecocriticism of Jane Costlow to “Gusev” helps to conceptualize Chekhov’s unlikely merging of what would commonly be perceived as boundaries of difference. In *Heart-Pine Russia*, Costlow discusses the forest as representing a liminal space between nature and human beings. While her discussion of this topic is specific to forests, it is also germane to Chekhov’s representation of the sea in “Gusev.” Costlow explains the merging of opposing elements in forests: “All of this involves moving, going back and forth across boundaries, whether ecological or linguistic or geopolitical, and it involves a shifting back and forth between different attitudes and emotions” (12). In “Gusev,” boundaries between life and death are crossed and reintegrated into an interconnectedness that includes the redistribution of Gusev’s life into the ecosystem of the ocean (213-14; 338-39). Costlow also posits the idea that one can exist in an alien environment, but that this foreign place can also be something that is familiar and eternal at the same time. She discusses the idea of experiencing places in which one is aware of both their otherness and their familiarity, and quotes Akhmatova as saying that foreign space in nature can present itself to the individual as something that is “not one’s own, but remembered forever” («не родная, но памятная навсегда»; 12). This pithy quotation is applicable to Chekhov’s use of nature in “Gusev,” because nature and man confront each other in ways that are both alien and part of one another.

The ending of “Gusev” exemplifies this simultaneous alienation and integration of diametrically opposed concepts such as life and death. Notably, Chekhov does not explicitly describe Gusev’s death: “The officer of the watch tilts one end of the plank. Gusev slides down it, flies off head first, does a somersault in the air and –in he splashes! Foam envelops him, and he seems swathed in lace for a second, but the second passes and he vanishes beneath the waves” («Вахтенный приподнимает конец доски, Гусев сползает с нее, летит вниз головой, потом переворачивается в воздухе и — бултых! Пена покрывает его, и мгновение кажется он окутанным в кружева»; “Gusev,” 213; «Гусев», 338). Here, Chekhov does not mention that it is Gusev’s body that is thrown overboard, but instead says that it is Gusev himself who is thrown into the ocean. This highlights an ambiguity concerning whether the character is alive or dead at the moment of his burial at sea. Moreover, the image of Gusev “swathed in lace” shows an integration between two elements: water and air, whose union produces the foam. There is a momentary suspension of time during which these oppositional elements become merged, creating a physicality in the merging of opposing elements, and for Gusev, the fluid transference of one type of existence into another.

Costlow’s commentary provides a frame that helps us understand the ways in which Chekhov complicates relationships between aspects of nature which, on the surface, appear isolated from one another. In some ways “Gusev” presages contemporary Russian art in its portrayal of a fluidity between man and his environment. For example, Costlow writes of a work by Oleg Vasil’ev entitled “Self-Portrait from the Back (1971)”: “Vasil’ev’s canvas gives us a different scale and a different outline of human form against the surrounding world... the human figure itself is in the process of disintegrating... in what still seems an act of motion into, rather

than fixed contemplation *in the face of / in front of / before*” (14). This unlikely mixture of autonomous elements has parallels to the disintegrative yet merging ending of “Gusev.”

In “Gusev” Chekhov upends pre-existing assumptions concerning man’s relationship with nature, helping the reader to understand new ways of thinking about death and the process of dying. As Gusev descends into the sea Chekhov belies the reader’s assumption that Gusev has died by instead using terms that are more suggestive of the living. Thus Chekhov again employs ambiguity as a device to add complexity to his nature descriptions, due to the many possible interpretations of what happens to Gusev as he sinks to the bottom of the sea: “He sinks eight or nine fathoms, then begins to move more and more slowly, swaying rhythmically as if trying to make up his mind” («Пройдя сажень восемь-десять, он начинает идти тише и тише, мерно покачивается, точно раздумывает»; “Gusev,” 213; «Гусев», 338). Chekhov’s language is figurative, but it also suggests that part of the mystery of nature is the unknowable quality of death. Chekhov subverts the reader’s assumption that Gusev, who has died and been buried at sea, ceases to exist.

Gusev’s death results in his redistribution into a plurality of life forms. Following his decent to the bottom of the ocean, Gusev is devoured by a shark and reenters the food chain, thus providing sustenance to multiple forms of aquatic life: “Then another dark hulk looms—a shark... and languidly opening its jaw with the two rows of fangs. The pilot fish are delighted, waiting to see what will happen next” («После этого показывается другое темное тело. Это акула... и лениво открывает пасть с двумя рядами зубов. Лоцмана в восторге; они остановились и смотрят, что будет дальше»; “Gusev,” 213; «Гусев», 339). It is explained in the footnotes of the story that pilot fish have a symbiotic relationship with sharks, of which one

aspect is to clean scraps of food between the shark's teeth (213; 338-39). Thus Gusev's eventual non-existence can be seen as a sacrifice that helps to sustain life in an alien environment.

Moreover, this interconnectedness of natural phenomena, such as life and death, that are normally seen as distinct from each other extends to Chekhov's description of the sky and the ocean, which reflect one another in vibrant color "for which human speech hardly has a name" («какие на человеческом языке и назвать трудно»; "Gusev," 214; «Гусев», 339). Chekhov purposefully and with craft does *not* give this color a name. As we have seen in "The Kiss" and "Fortune," by his depiction of nature as something that cannot be defined, Chekhov increases its immensity in relation to human beings and the existence they struggle to comprehend through their narratives. The story about the giant fish that Gusev relates to Paul Ivanovich at the beginning of "Gusev" both confirms and complicates what the reader discovers by the story's end. Gusev's story frames his own fate and that of Paul Ivanovich and another character: all of these passengers are buried at sea (210, 207; 335, 332). However, Chekhov complicates the narrative by revealing to the reader that the process of death integrates Gusev more directly into nature, and also by suggesting that this integration creates the possibility for new forms of existence.

## **V: "The Man in the Case"**

In "The Man in the Case" Chekhov reflects even more explicitly on nature's capacity to undermine the stories people tell. As John Freedman has argued, "The Man in a Case" is a story about telling stories (14-16). In this work, a schoolmaster named Burkin tells a tale about Belikov, a man who always wore galoshes and walked around with an umbrella which he kept in a case. According to Burkin, Belikov was a repressive force in the town, constantly threatening

sanctions on his fellow citizens for even the slightest transgression. Freedman points out that Burkin is both an artful and an unreliable storyteller: he embellishes details and condemns Belikov for traits that Burkin and the other townspeople in fact share (3-4). What Freedman does not mention, but which I would like to suggest, is that nature plays a role in alerting readers to Burkin's hypocrisy.

It is particularly important to pay attention to the weather in "The Man in a Case." In Burkin's story the local townspeople suggest to Belikov that he should marry a resident of the town, Varenka. Burkin describes Belikov as deliberating over the seriousness of getting married and highlights his inability to commit to following through with it. Later a caricature of Belikov circulates around town, showing him with Varenka with the inscription "Anthropos in Love" («влюбленный антропос»; "The Man in the Case," 357; «Человек в футляре», 49). The psychic shock from this hits Belikov so hard that he falls ill and dies. At first the townspeople feel liberated from Belikov's oppression, but eventually come to realize that after his death conditions of restriction and freedom in the town have not changed (360; 53). It rains at Belikov's funeral, forcing the townspeople to wear galoshes and bring umbrellas, which serve to commemorate him: "And, as though in his honor, it was dull, rainy weather on the day of his funeral, and we all wore galoshes and took our umbrellas" («И как бы в честь его во время похорон была пасмурная, дождливая погода, и все мы были в калошах и с зонтами»; "The Man in the Case," 360; «Человек в футляре», 52). Up until this point in the story, these two items were exclusively assigned to Belikov, whom Burkin describes as using them to insulate himself from the world. Nature reveals at the funeral that the townspeople themselves are likewise vulnerable to the elements and have a need to protect themselves.

In order to understand how Chekhov's representation of nature departs from Russian literary tradition, it is instructive to compare "The Man in a Case" to such a foundational text as Nikolai Karamzin's "Poor Liza" («Бедная Лиза», 1794). Karamzin's story tells of a love affair between a nobleman named Erast and a poor peasant named Liza. Karamzin invokes nature as a reflection of the internalized, socially imposed sense of shame and guilt that Liza experiences upon being seduced by Erast: "Meanwhile, lightning flashed, and thunder rolled. Liza began to tremble all over. 'Erast, Erast!' she said. 'I am terrified! I am afraid that the thunder will kill me like a criminal!' The storm raged threateningly; rain poured from black clouds—it seemed that nature was lamenting Liza's lost innocence" («Между тем блеснула молния и грянул гром. Лиза вся задрожала. Эрост, Эрост! — сказала она. — Мне страшно! Я боюсь, чтобы гром не убил меня, как преступницу! Грозно шумела буря, дождь лился из черных облаков — казалось, что натура сетовала о потерянной Лизиной невинности»; "Poor Liza," 62; «Бедная Лиза», 615). While in "Poor Liza" the weather reflects Liza's shame, which stems from her socially unsanctioned love affair with Erast, in "The Man in The Case" the weather alerts readers to society's hypocrisy in othering Belikov. Thus for Karamzin nature reaffirms Liza's emotional state and society's judgment. By contrast, for Chekhov nature contradicts the feelings of the townspeople and releases Belikov from their judgment.

Significantly, in "The Man in the Case," nature offers not only release, but also catharsis. This is true not only for Burkin and the slumbering townspeople, but also for the reader. After finishing his story Burkin looks up to the moon and then out into the landscape at the slumbering town. Chekhov writes: "When on a moonlit night you see a broad village street, with its cottages, haystacks, and slumbering willows, a feeling of calm comes over the soul" («Когда в лунную ночь видишь широкую сельскую улицу с ее избами, стогами, уснувшими ивами, то на



душе становится тихо»; “The Man in the Case,” 361; «Человек в футляре», 53). Here, Burkin’s view of the landscape prompts an intriguing perspectival shift: from his own personal perspective to that of a more general “you.” Chekhov also ascribes Burkin’s experience of serenity to the general “you,” inviting the readers to share in Burkin’s tranquility. Much like Belikov, whom nature released from judgment through descriptions of the weather earlier in the story, and like Burkin, whom nature now releases from the confines of his own perspective, the reader too is released from the limitations of Burkin’s story. Indeed, opening onto a perspective that is broader than that of any one human subject, this landscape invites reflection on—and moves beyond—the limited perspective most stories offer.

Indeed, much like the reader, Ivan Ivanovich hears Burkin’s tale of Belikov, and his response to it models reflection on, and transcendence of, its limits. Ivan Ivanovich takes a broader perspective on the story, seeing it as a story about all people, not just about men like Belikov: “Isn’t our living in town, airless and crowded, our writing useless papers, our playing vint—isn’t that all a sort of case for us?” («А разве то, что мы живем в городе в духоте, в тесноте, пишем ненужные бумаги, играем в винт — разве это не футляр?»); “The Man in the Case,” 361; «Человек в футляре», 53). Moreover, while Chekhov does not explicitly mention that Ivan Ivanovich sees the landscape that invites a broader perspective, the reader knows from the beginning of the story that Ivan Ivanovich is sitting outside, and therefore it can be suggested that he, too, is among those included in the general “you” who sees such views (361; 53-4). Therefore in “The Man in the Case” Chekhov complicates the narrative by showing us how it takes on new meanings as it is passed from teller to listener.

## **VI: “The Lady with the Little Dog”**

“The Lady with the Little Dog” may be seen as the apogee of Chekhov’s tendency to confront the narratives characters construct with nature. “Lady” is a story about Gurov and Anna, who meet and fall in love while away from their spouses in the seaside resort town of Yalta. Gurov relies on narrative to understand his relationship with Anna, which he assumes will be the latest in a series of short-lived and meaningless, though pleasant, affairs (417; 131-32). The setting at Yalta facilitates precisely the sort of love stories Gurov imagines he is beginning with Anna. Yalta is a place that creates a potential for strangers from different cities to meet one another. Moreover, it provides Anna and Gurov separation from their spouses, anonymity and a break in routine from their daily lives. And yet, unexpectedly, Gurov falls deeply in love with Anna, and after she leaves Yalta for her own city, Gurov becomes obsessed with reuniting with her, rather than letting go of the affair as usual. Importantly, it is the view of the sea at Oreanda, near Yalta, that first challenges Gurov’s and readers’ assumption that his relationship with Anna will be just another example of a familiar story (419; 134). However, complicating what appears to be a moment of wholeness between the characters and nature at Oreanda, Chekhov presents us with the problems the characters face when they try to rewrite their lives in accordance with this experience.

While Gurov and Anna are still in Yalta, flowers act as a conduit for expressing their otherwise unstated sexual desires. An explicit incidence of this happens after Anna learns that her husband has not arrived at the ferry: “Anna Sergeevna was silent now and smelled the flowers, not looking at Gurov” («Анна Сергеевна уже молчала и нюхала цветы»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 417; «Дама с собачкой», 131). When Gurov asks Anna what to do next (417; 131), Anna gives “no answer” («ничего не ответила»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 417; «Дама с собачкой», 131). Gurov then kisses her for the first time, and he is “showered

with the fragrance and moisture of the flowers” («обдало запахом и влагой цветов»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 417; «Дама с собачкой», 131). Anna and Gurov commune with nature and one another in silence. There is a fusing of Anna’s sexuality with the natural aroma and moisture of the flowers, and through silent sensory input this is conveyed to Gurov. Here, nature imposes itself on the characters, binding up their own language in silence, and their actions are highlighted as instinctual and not of their own willful construction.

During their visit to Oreanda, Chekhov again overwhelms the characters with silence. The characters are set against “the dull noise of the sea” («глухой шум моря»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 419; «Дама с собачкой», 133), which speaks “of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us” («о покое, о вечном сне, какой ожидает нас»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 419; «Дама с собачкой», 133). Expounding on his observation that silence is a key element of Chekhov’s fiction, Valentine writes, “To stress that nature’s existence is independent from man’s, Chekhov frequently conjures images of a rapport between two elements of nature, a rapport in which man is not participating” (155). One possible interpretation of this is that nature’s rapport is non-verbal, and man is not able to engage all he observes within his narratives. In fact silence is a way in which nature narrates key elements in the story by allowing the reader to simply witness nature’s presence and influence on the characters.

In Oreanda they sat on a bench not far from the church, looked down on the sea, and were silent. Yalta was barely visible through the morning mist, white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops. The leaves of the trees did not stir, cicadas called, and the monotonous, dull noise of the sea, coming from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep that awaits us. So it had sounded below when neither Yalta nor Oreanda were there,

so it sounded now and would go on sounding with the same dull indifference when we are no longer here. And in this constancy, in this utter indifference to the life and death of each of us, there perhaps lies hidden the pledge of our eternal salvation, the unceasing movement of life on earth, of unceasing perfection. Sitting beside the young woman, who looked so beautiful in the dawn, appeased and enchanted by the view of this magical décor—sea, mountains, clouds, the open sky—Gurov reflected that, essentially, if you thought of it, everything was beautiful in this world, everything except for what we ourselves think and do when we forget the higher goals of being and our human dignity.

В Ореанде сидели на скамье, недалеко от церкви, смотрели вниз на море и молчали. Ялта была едва видна сквозь утренний туман, на вершинах гор неподвижно стояли белые облака. Листва не шевелилась на деревьях, кричали цикады, и однообразный, глухой шум моря, доносившийся снизу, говорил о покое, о вечном сне, какой ожидает нас. Так шумело внизу, когда еще тут не было ни Ялты, ни Ореанды, теперь шумит и будет шуметь так же равнодушно и глухо, когда нас не будет. И в этом постоянстве, в полном равнодушии к жизни и смерти каждого из нас кроется, быть может, залог нашего вечного спасения, непрерывного движения жизни на земле, непрерывного совершенства. Сидя рядом с молодой женщиной, которая на рассвете казалась такой красивой, успокоенный и очарованный в виду этой сказочной обстановки — моря, гор, облаков, широкого неба, Гуров думал о том, как, в сущности, если вдуматься, всё прекрасно на этом свете, всё, кроме того, что мы сами мыслим и делаем, когда забываем о высших

целях бытия, о своем человеческом достоинстве. (“The Lady with the Little Dog,” 419; «Дама с собачкой», 133-4)

Here, the characters undergo an experience that affords them new perspectives on life. It is also here that nature takes precedence over not only the characters, but Yalta itself. The characters are immersed in the natural landscape and nature eclipses constructions of man’s urban environment. Yalta falls to the background and nature comes to the fore, thus the sea prompts a perspectival shift similar to the one in “The Man in the Case.” In the scene at Oreanda, we cannot tell if the perspective is Gurov’s, Gurov’s and Anna’s or the narrator’s. It’s as if the scene creates a universal perspective that eclipses human existence. Time shifts in scale, expanding and becoming diffuse, thereby extinguishing the significance of man in its entirety. This broadening of perspective seems to lend Gurov a new perspective on life which “seemed to transform him” («точно переродили его»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 419; «Дама с собачкой», 134). This “transformation” gives Gurov a new-found ability to love. However, here Chekhov affords the reader a different perspective. As the plot of “Lady” progresses, we witness that Gurov’s attempts to realize his love for Anna fail to translate into the characters’ respective societies.

The theme of the connection between love and nature has been explored by other Russian writers, and it is useful to compare the different ways in which Chekhov handles this theme from those who preceded him. Scholar Carol A. Flath in her article “Art and Idleness: Chekhov’s ‘The House with a Mezzanine’” points out that “Chekhov was deeply influenced by Turgenev” (464). In light of this, it’s useful to compare Chekhov’s treatment of love and nature in “Lady” with Turgenev’s treatment of similar themes in “First Love” («Первая любовь», 1860). “First Love” is a frame story in which a man named Vladimir Petrovich relates the story of his first love. As

the account of his love unfolds against a backdrop of nature, Turgenev makes frequent use of the linguistic device of the pathetic fallacy, or in other words he “imbue[s] the natural world with human feeling.”<sup>4</sup> For instance, at one point Vladimir describes how he stays awake through the night and is drawn to the window by the light of a distant storm: “Those mute flashes of lightning, those restrained gleams, seemed to mirror the secret, mute impulses flaring up inside me” («Эти немые молнии, эти сдержанные блистания, казалось, отвечали тем немым и тайным порывам, которые вспыхивали также во мне»; “First Love,” 504-5; «Первая любовь», 322). It is instructive to note the crucial difference between Chekhov’s treatment of nature at Oreanda and Turgenev’s description of the mute storm. In Turgenev the storm is about Vladimir and his feelings, whereas in “Lady” the description of the sea is about human life more broadly, and in particular about what matters and what doesn’t when viewed against the backdrop of infinity. Chekhov complicates even this by eclipsing the importance of humanity against the existence of a sea that remains “indifferent” to human concerns.

Chekhov creates a link between the natural and urban environments Gurov and Anna inhabit by importing nature imagery from Oreanda to their homes away from Yalta. In Oreanda nature overwhelms the characters and obscures the resort town with its presence: “In Oreanda they sat on a bench not far from the church, looked down on the sea, and were silent. Yalta was barely visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountain-tops” («В Ореанде сидели на скамье, недалеко от церкви, смотрели вниз на море и молчали. Ялта была едва видна сквозь утренний туман, на вершинах гор неподвижно стояли белые облака»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 419; «Дама с собачкой», 133). This imagery takes on an entirely different context after the lovers become separated: “A month would pass and Anna

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<sup>4</sup> “Pathetic fallacy,” *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1993).

Sergeevna, as it seemed to him, would be covered by mist in his memory” («Пройдет какой-нибудь месяц, и Анна Сергеевна, казалось ему, покроется в памяти туманом»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 421; «Дама с собачкой», 136). In this way Gurov disconnects from the present and his internal narration takes on qualities of the past. Gurov also invents stories about his theoretical future with Anna (421; 136). Gurov is unable to tell others about his experience; when he tries, what he says is entirely dismissed as if he had said nothing at all (422; 137). Thus Chekhov transforms what first appears to be a moment of union between the lovers and nature into a state of disconnection and anxiety.

Later, the characters struggle to rewrite their life story in accordance with the insights afforded by the view of the sea at Oreanda, but they cannot. Chekhov employs similar imagery from that at Oreanda, now in a human context, when Gurov travels to Anna’s provincial town to look for her at the theater: “And here, too, as in all provincial theaters generally, a haze hung over the chandeliers” («И тут, как вообще во всех губернских театрах, был туман повыше люстры»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 423; «Дама с собачкой», 139). There is a mixture of the unsophisticated provincial crowd and Anna’s “vulgar lorgnette” that lends a crude and coarse quality to the haze that envelops the theater.

In “Lady” nature serves to liberate the lovers when they are at Oreanda, but their attempt to create a narrative continuing from that moment into the future only results in uncertainty and complication. At the end of the story, we see Anna and Gurov still struggling to rewrite their own life story after they have reunited. Chekhov brings the characters into conflict with the narrative they have constructed about themselves: “And it seemed that, just a little more – and the solution would be found, and then a new, beautiful life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that the end was still far, far off, and that the most complicated and difficult part was just

beginning” («И казалось, что еще немного — и решение будет найдено, и тогда начнется новая, прекрасная жизнь; и обоим было ясно, что до конца еще далеко-далеко и что самое сложное и трудное только еще начинается»; “The Lady with the Little Dog,” 427; «Дама с собачкой», 143). This final line, with its reference to what is “only just beginning,” points to the construction of a new narrative. It is uncertain if the narrative that Gurov and Anna want to create for themselves after Oreanda will translate into their societal environments.

## **VII: Conclusion**

Drawing on existing accounts of nature in Chekhov’s fiction as well as in Russian literature and culture more broadly, this thesis has revealed a crucial and previously unrecognized affinity between five of Chekhov’s most celebrated stories. In “The Kiss,” “Fortune,” “Gusev,” “The Man in the Case,” and “The Lady with the Little Dog,” nature complicates the characters and the stories they tell themselves and one another. In some cases, nature gives the characters new insights and helps them to evolve. In others it gives readers a new understanding that the characters themselves do not share. In all cases nature in Chekhov’s works opens a broader perspective, dwarfing the characters and their existential anxieties by the immensity of land, water, or cosmos.



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